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Scholarships for special needs children squeaks by House, Governor's desk is next stop

ATLANTA – Senate Bill 10, legislation that will allow the parents of special needs children to use scholarships to educate their children either in a public or private school passed the Georgia House of Representatives in the closest of votes – 91-84 with the Speaker of the House, Glenn Richardson (R-Hiram), casting the tie-breaking vote. The bill, sponsored by Senate President Pro Tempore Eric Johnson (R-Savannah) is modeled after Florida's successful *McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities*.

"If parents have no choice, there is zero incentive for public schools to improve their quality or remain accountable to the parents and the taxpayers of the community," Sen. Johnson said following the vote. "We want to ensure that every disabled child, regardless of wealth or circumstances, has the opportunity to receive the very best education available."

The *Georgia Special Needs Scholarships*, which will provide money for children with disabilities and will combine parent-directed choices with student-directed funding, now heads to Governor Perdue for his signature.

"If a school fails to meet the expectations of the parents of a special needs child, then the GSN Scholarship will allow them to use the state's share of their child's funding as a scholarship to enroll their child in another school – either within the public school system or at a private school," Sen. Johnson continued.

In just six years, Florida's McKay program has gone from funding less than 1,000 children in its first year to more than 17,000 students last year. According to the Manhattan Institute, 93 percent of the parents of children with disabilities have said they are "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the new school compared with those who were satisfied (33 percent) with the public school where their child previously was enrolled. Class sizes are smaller, behavior problems have decreased and the children were far less victimized by other students who ridiculed them and their disabilities.

The scholarships will be based on the cost of delivering the same services of the current public school. Georgia officials anticipate that more than 4,000 students will take advantage of the scholarships next year, and that the average scholarship will be about \$9,000 per year.

"Public schools do a tremendous job meeting the needs of most special needs students," Sen. Johnson said following the Senate's vote on the bill earlier this year, "and they are to be commended for that. However, all children are different and this bill is designed to give parents more options in choosing the best educational program for their child. We recognize that all children are individuals and a different school might more closely meet the needs of the student and parents.

"I fundamentally believe that parents are in the best position to know their children and their unique needs. They deserve the right to make the most appropriate decisions for their own children. This is especially true for parents of children with special needs," Sen. Johnson went on to say. "These families have so many hurdles and the ability to choose the most appropriate education for their children should not be one of them."

Sen. Johnson said this proposal will not reduce the amount of funds available to public schools. In fact, he says, this legislation should leave school systems with more money because they are educating and transporting fewer students. Only the state's portion of the funds will follow the child to the selected public or private school as a scholarship.

"At its basic level, SB 10 simply provides an option for the parent of a child with special needs when they believe the local public school is not helping their child. Most parents – upward of 95 percent – will still decide that their neighborhood public school is the best educational system for their child. But as for the other five percent, they should not be blocked from making those educational choices that will allow their special education children to be all that they can be."

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Sen. Eric Johnson is the President Pro Tempore of the State Senate. He represents Senate District One, which includes Bryan County and portions of Chatham and Liberty counties. He may be reached by e-mail at eric.johnson@senate.ga.gov or at 404.656.5109.